



A Musical Life

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LAST YEAR, DR. JOHN CIPOLLA, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MUSIC, JOINED THE WORLD OF SOLO PODCASTERS WITH A SHOW ABOUT PRACTICING AND PERFORMING ON CLARINET AND SAXOPHONE. IN ONE RECENT SEGMENT, HE TELLS LISTENERS THAT IN ADDITION TO WARMING UP THEIR FINGERS AND THEIR LIPS, THEY MUST “WARM UP THEIR EARS” AS WELL.

He knows what he is talking about. As a musician, Dr. Cipolla's breadth of experience includes playing with New York's Radio City Music Hall orchestra as well as with the Cats orchestra on Broadway, and recording with the accomplished Kentucky-born clarinetist/saxophonist and WKU Professor Emeritus Doc Livingston. And as a teacher, he has been helping students learn better practice and performance techniques since he came to Western several years ago. The podcast is one of the many ways Dr. Cipolla combines his love of music with his love of teaching.

For John Cipolla, music is a lifelong journey. “Music takes a long time to learn. I’ve been at it since fifth grade — I’m forty-six and I’m still learning,” he said. Before taking up an academic career, Cipolla worked as a full-time musician in the New York City area. “I was a freelance woodwind player. I played Broadway shows, studio recording sessions, the NYC Opera, Radio City,” he said.

While in New York, Cipolla earned a Bachelor's of Music in saxophone performance from the Eastman School of Music. “I spent my first year at Juilliard, but didn't like it,” he recalled. “But I did meet Wynton Marsalis there. He was a year ahead of me, and we became friends.” Marsalis went on to be a famous performer, but as Dr. Cipolla points out, even his stellar career began with someone — another musician or a teacher — who inspired and encouraged him. Today, in his position with the WKU



Music Department, John Cipolla hopes to contribute in some measure as a role model and inspiration to a new generation of musicians.

After Eastman, Cipolla earned a Master's of Music in clarinet performance from Rutgers University, all the while continuing to perform in New York's Broadway shows, recording sessions, and the Radio City Music Hall Orchestra. In 2000, he left New York for the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to complete a Doctorate of Musical Arts, then joined the music department at Western.

Today, his days consist primarily of practicing, teaching, and performing. "The university setting is great for me both as a performer and as a teacher. The sense of security is something I never had when I was just performing, even though I've always gotten plenty of work as a musician," Cipolla said.

In addition to teaching classes at Western, he also pursues his own

recording projects. One recent CD recording, *Misbehavin'*, done in conjunction with Doc Livingston, has been well-received. "I felt like it was a milestone to put the project together and get it out there," he said. The CD received many excellent reviews from the press and is now available through the popular web site CD Baby.

Cipolla also performs live, which allows him to experience what he calls "the personal human impact." He added, "I play a lot of solo recitals and chamber music, but I also look for focused recording projects where I can work for longer periods in preparation for the project, and hope to attain a richer and deeper musical experience for myself and the listener."

Behind all the public performing and teaching lie many, many hours of practice time. But he doesn't resist that part of his job at all:

"I'm a perpetual student. I love to practice." His practicing techniques have evolved over the years, he said, but underlying any successful practice regimen is a commitment to setting goals and then sticking with the process until you reach them. Learning music, he said, "is a forever process, hammering away at it and achieving little milestones." Ideally, he added, he would practice "about three hours a day," but that isn't always possible. "There's a fair amount of maintenance required for woodwind players," he explained, "especially in the muscles of the face. So I try to keep a routine of an hour a day at least. When I was in high school and college, though, I would practice four to five hours per day."

Superior musical performance, Cipolla believes, requires a technical mastery of the music that can come only with many hours of practice and review. One of his podcasts deals

with “internalizing” music, taking it apart and getting to know it from within, so that all aspects of it are familiar. To illustrate what happens when a person has internalized a piece of music, he hummed the first pitch of “Happy Birthday.” He said, “You see? If someone gives you the first pitch, you can sing it easily because it’s so familiar.”

Despite his current job title, Dr. Cipolla said, he perceives himself “more as a performer/teacher rather than as a traditional college professor.” As part of his application for this job, he had to write a statement of his teaching philosophy. He explained, “I said I wanted to help the community and to be a source of help for younger people interested in the clarinet and saxophone.” And that is precisely what he does at WKU. “I teach people at the college level, but I also deal with people outside the university, especially at middle schools, high schools, and regional, national, and international music conventions,” he said.

Cipolla encourages the young musicians he deals with to approach music as a problem-solving exercise: to learn the music inside and out, and then to put together a quality performance or recital. “To stick with

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learning the music and then to do the recital, that’s a big achievement for them,” he said. To help students understand the process of performing and how it relates to teaching, he performs solo recitals at WKU every year for his students to attend. “My role when I play onstage myself is to be a representative, a model, so the students can learn to reach higher and to play as well as they can.”

Dr. Cipolla’s foray into the world of podcasting began after he was forced by his busy schedule to turn down requests to speak or play at area schools. “I’d get requests to go to high schools to work with students, but I couldn’t always go because I was busy doing my job here. So I started doing audio recordings they could access.” He added, “I’ve gotten lots of positive responses from band directors and students.” To listen to these music podcasts, go to digitalcommons.wku.edu [search “Cipolla”].

For the future, Dr. Cipolla plans to continue doing what he loves:

performing and teaching. He will continue to speak at conferences and play at recitals, and he hopes to do another CD recording soon, possibly featuring a clarinet quartet playing jazz and swing music. He will also continue mentoring young musicians, and helping them recognize that to learn music is to learn something that helps them develop confidence and solve problems, which are things they can take with them in life, no matter what they do in their careers. “The process of learning music teaches them to stick at something until they reach their goal,” he said.

Behind all this activity in a busy professor’s life is a total commitment to music itself. To sum up his commitment and passion for the art, Cipolla said, “I simply love music — I go to bed thinking about it, I dream about it, and I wake up thinking about it.” ■

